

#29

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Inaugural Essay

On

Dysentery

By

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of Virginia

April 1862

Chapman's Bay

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In reflecting on the various events, which have transpired in the moral government of the world, we find that to the agency of man, under the direction of providence, we stand indebted for a variety of inventions and discoveries, which have contributed to diffuse knowledge and happiness through a dark and miserable world.

In the great catalogue thus presented to our view, the discovery of medicine occupies a very conspicuous place, as productive of most important consequences.

To feel and properly appreciate the advantages resulting from this discovery, belongs only to those who have entered the gloomy chamber, and beheld that morn which rose so bright overcast with untimely darkness, that goodness which captivated every heart, and vivacity which sparkled in every company, those abilities which were formed for adorning the higher stations of life, and him who had the fairest prospect of running a long course, prostrated by disease, and by the judicious administration of suitable medicines, the progress of disease arrested, and him who but a short time previous seemed

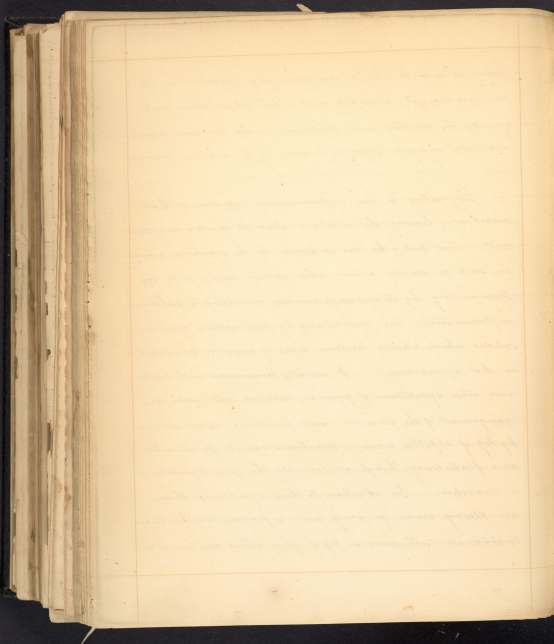
The object of the present work is to show that
the system of the present government is the best
which has yet been devised for the purpose of
governing a large empire. It is not a treatise
on the principles of government, but a practical
work, which shows how the system is carried
out in practice. It is not a history of the
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shut out from the world, raised from the bed of disease,
restored to the embrace of tender parents and anxious
friends, and regaining all the brilliancy of health.

In order to illustrate the power which an early and
judicious use of medicine has in obviating or lessening
the baneful effects of disease, we need only select the
very common, yet often fatal one of Dysentery.
Although this disease in its incipient stage is readily de-
tected and managed without difficulty, yielding quickly
to medicines judiciously selected, and promptly and per-
-severingly administered, yet when by neglect or improp-
-per treatment it has been suffered to assume a chronic
character, or from long continuance become habitual, it is
then more difficult to manage and more pernicious in its
effects. frequently continuing unsubdued by the best con-
-certed plans, the result of medical skill and mature de-
-liberation, until the patient worn out by the disease,
looks a victim to the impotency of our art. To prevent
such effects it is of great importance that every practitioner
should be well acquainted with the disease under all its

forms, so as to be able to recognise and arrest it in its commencement, especially as it is one which attacking equally the wealthy and luxurious with the poor and destitute may be expected to occur in the practice of every one.

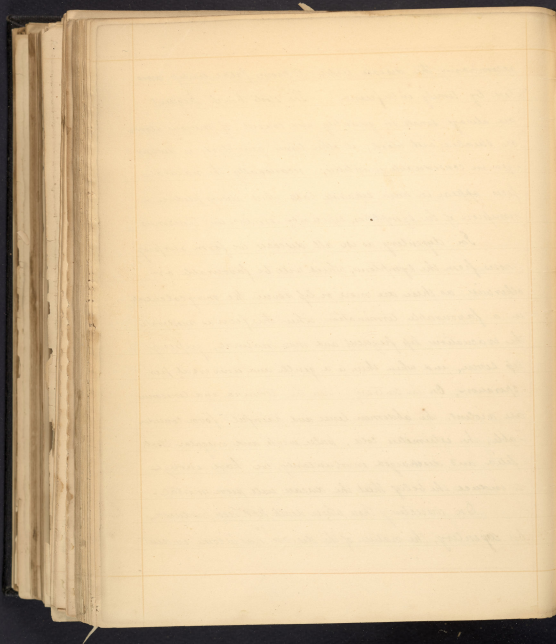
Dysentery is an inflammatory affection of that membrane, lining the intestines, called its mucous or villous coat. That such is the case is proven by the symptoms which are such as usually attend other diseases known to be inflammatory, by its yielding to remedies calculated to subdue inflammation, but principally by post-mortem examinations, which clearly discover signs of vascular excitement in that membrane. It usually commences with chills and other symptoms of pyrexia, attended with some derangement of the stomach and intestines, as evidenced by loss of appetite, nausea, sometimes vomiting, costiveness and flatulency, though occasionally the first symptom is diarrhoea. In addition to these symptoms there are always severe griping and a frequent inclination to evacuate, with more or less of fever, which continues to



accompanying the disease until it proves fatal unless arrested by timely interference. The stools though frequent are always small in quantity and consist of mucous alone, or streaked with blood, at other times pure blood is discharged in considerable quantities; occasionally the natural feces appear in hard separate balls, which always produce a remission of the symptoms, especially tormina and tenesmus.

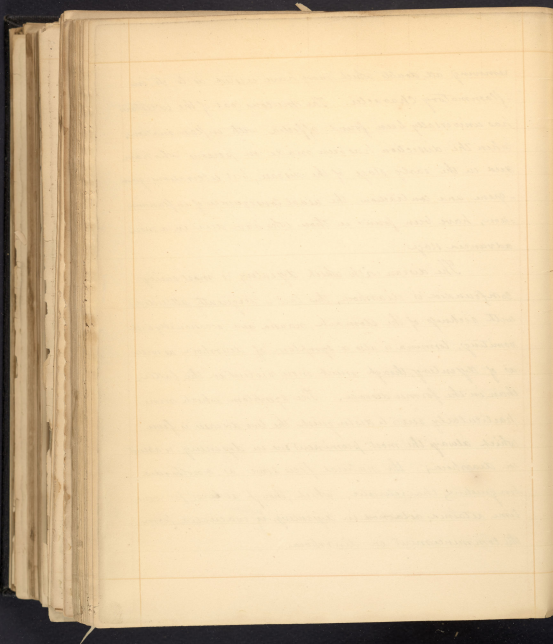
In dysentery, as in all diseases, we form our prognosis from the symptoms, which will be favourable or otherwise as these are more or less severe. We may calculate on a favourable termination when the fever is moderate the evacuation less frequent and more natural, griping less severe, and when there is a gentle and universal perspiration. On the contrary when the tormina and tenesmus are violent, the abdomen tense and painful, fever considerable, the extremities cold, pulse weak and irregular, stools fetid and discharged involuntarily, we have enough to induce the belief that the disease will prove mortal.

On dissecting those whose death has been produced by dysentery, the nature of the disease has become evident



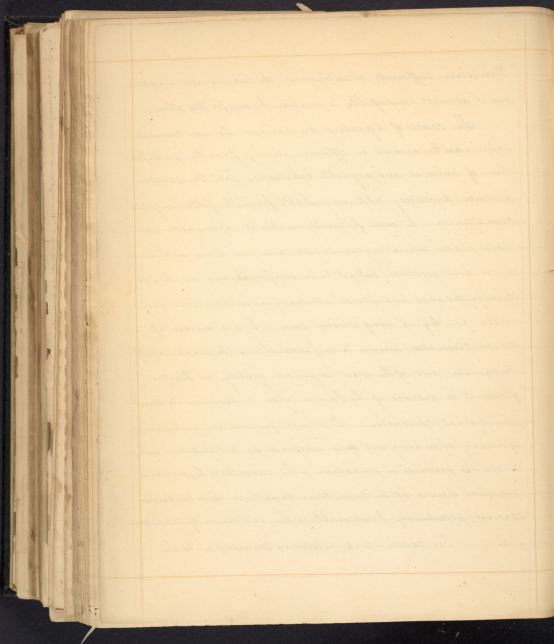
removing all doubts which may have existed as to its inflammatory character. The mucous coat of the intestine has universally been found affected with inflammation, when the dissection has been made on persons who have died in the early stage of the disease, but ulceration, gangrene and contraction, the usual consequences of inflammation, have been found in those who have died in a more advanced stage.

The disease with which dysentery is most easily confounded is diarrhoea, this last is frequently attended with sickness of the stomach, nausea and occasionally with vomiting, tormina is also a symptom of diarrhoea as well as of dysentery, though much more violent in the latter, than in the former disease. The symptom which more particularly serves to distinguish the two diseases is fever which always the most prominent one in dysentery is absent in diarrhoea; the natural feces serve as another distinguishing characteristic, which, though at least for some time retained, retained in dysentery, ^{and} is evacuated from the commencement in diarrhoea.



These serve sufficiently to distinguish the two diseases, and render it almost impossible to mistake the one for the other.

The causes of dysentery are various, the most common however are miasmata or effluvia arising from the putrefaction of animal and vegetable substances. That miasmata produce dysentery appears probable from the following circumstances. It most frequently makes its appearance in those places where they are known to be morbidly active as in low grounds subject to be overflowed, and in the vicinity of marshes and ponds especially after these have been acted on by a very warm sun. It is a disease of warm climates, known to be favourable to the production of miasmata and of the most injurious quality, we therefore find it a disease of the Indies when it assumes its most malignant character. It is most frequent in autumn especially after long wet spells succeeded by hot weather and it always prevails in proportion to the warmth of the weather provided there is at the same time moisture, two circumstances peculiarly favourable to the evolution of miasmata. The cause which determines miasmata to the



intestines so as to produce dysentery rather than fever, is not yet known. Sir Gilbert Blane is of the opinion, that when the system is equally predisposed by the action of Miasmata to either disease, that irregularities in eating and drinking are most likely to produce dysentery, while fever is the consequence of exposure to the weather &c. but the numerous cases of dysentery, which can be traced to no other than the latter cause are sufficient to produce at least some doubt as to the correctness of his opinion. Though Miasmata are a frequent, yet they are not the only cause of dysentery. Cold applied to the body perternaturally, heat, especially if conjoined with moisture, is a very fruitful source of this disease, it is supposed that it acts by checking the insensible perspiration or in other words deranging the healthy action of the skin, and that the intestines become affected in consequence of that sympathy which is known to exist between them. To this cause is attributed its prevalence in the Indies during the rainy season of those Islands. Improper or excessive quantities of food, by irritating and otherwise disordering the bowels are also fe

quent causes of dysentery, hence we see it a disease of those who indulge in the excesses of the table, marring their pleasures and becoming a scourge to their intemperance -

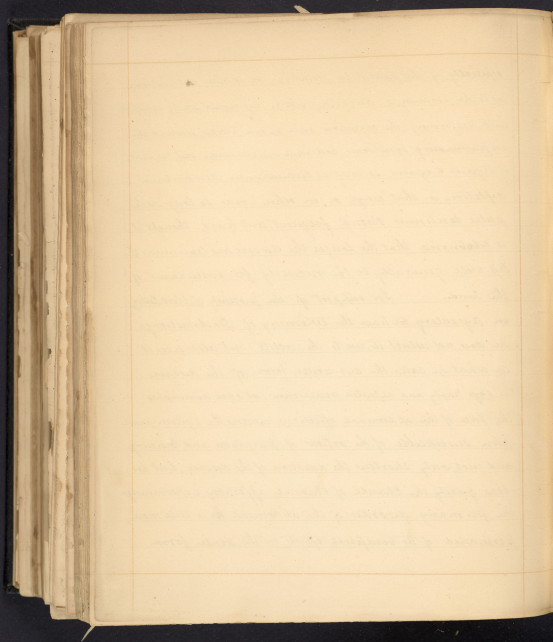
Dr Bancroft supposes however, that cold, exposure to the weather except in eating &c most usually act as exciting, and that miasmata may be considered principal predisposing cause of this disease.

We come now to the consideration of the treatment of dysentery in which there are three indications. The first is to subdue the inflammatory action, which is accomplished by Venesection Emetics & Purgatives, the second to evacuate the irritating contents of the intestines, and for this purpose we make use of Emetics & Purgatives, the third to restore the healthy action of the skin, which is best effected by the various Escharotics & also blisters.

But it is necessary to point out the circumstances under which each of the foregoing remedies is prescribed, and for that purpose I shall commence with Venesection.

If the inflammatory symptoms are high, manifested by considerable fever and pain in the abdomen, more

especially if the patient be plethoric, we should not hesitate as to the propriety of abstracting blood, nor should we be satisfied with performing the operation once or even twice, should the inflammatory symptoms continue unabated, but repeat it again & again so long as circumstances demand ~~let~~ depletion in that way, or in other words so long as the pulse continues strong, frequent and hard, though it is observed that the longer the disease has continued the less will generally be the necessity for evacuations of this kind. In support of the propriety of blood-letting in dysentery we have the testimony of Dr Armstrong, he does not restrict its use to the acute, but also uses it in what he calls the sub-acute form of the disease. He says "Early and repeated venesection at once diminishes the force of the abdominal affections, renders the system more susceptible of the action of purgatives and Mercury, and not only shortens the duration of the disease, but lessens greatly the chance of chronic affections supervening the primary disorder of the abdomen." He is well persuaded of its beneficial effects in the acute form



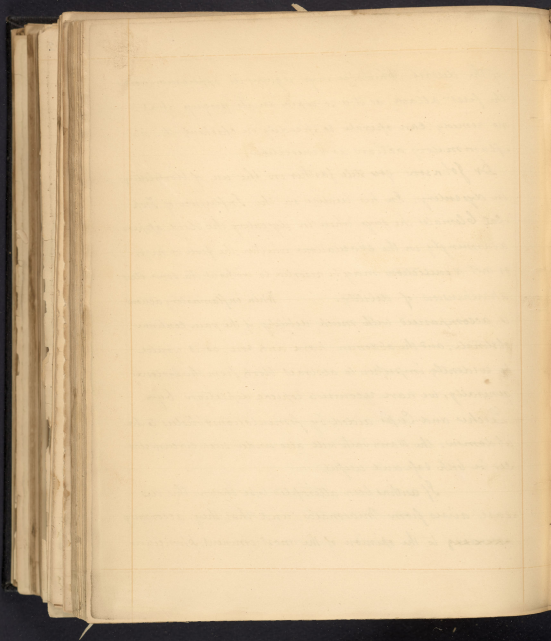
of the disease, which, he says, requires its application from the first attack as it is so rapid in its progress that no remedy can operate so speedily in checking the inflammatory action as venesection.

Dr Johnson goes still farther in the use of bloodletting in dysentery. In his treatise on the Influence of Pop. - eac Climate, he says, When in dysentery the blood appears alarmingly in the evacuations whether the fever be high or not venesection may be resorted to without the smallest apprehension of debility.

When inflammatory action is accompanied with much debility, if the pain continues obstinate, and the abdomen hard and sore, as it would be evidently improper to abstract blood from the system generally, we have recourse to topical depletion by

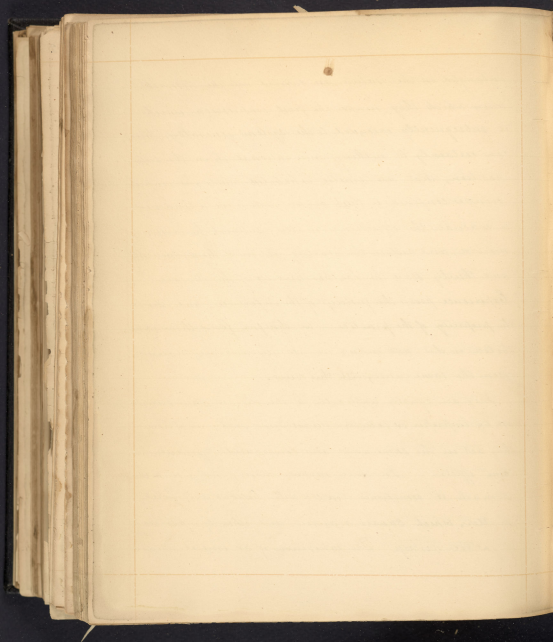
Leeches and Cups aided by fomentations & blisters to the abdomen, the warm bath will also under such circumstances be both safe and useful.

If aithas been attempted to be shown, the disease arises from Miasmata, and that they, according ~~according~~ to the opinion of the most eminent physicians



entangled in the saliva are carried into the stomach upon which they make the first impression, which is subsequently extended to the system generally, there can certainly be nothing more rational than the supposition, that an emetic exhibited while the impression is confined to that organ, will have a tendency to evacuate the offending matter, subvert the existing morbid, and restore the healthy action of the stomach and thereby stay the farther progress of the disease. Experience proves the justness of the inference, and shows the propriety of the practice. we therefore find them exhibited in this and indeed in all diseases originating from the same cause, with this view.

They are equally applicable to the disease when brought on by improper or excessive quantities of food; and here they act in the same way and consequently produce the same effects. In more advanced stages of the disease the stomach is sometimes loaded with bilious and foul matter, which causes nausea, and other symptoms of gastric distemp. The exhibition of an emetic under



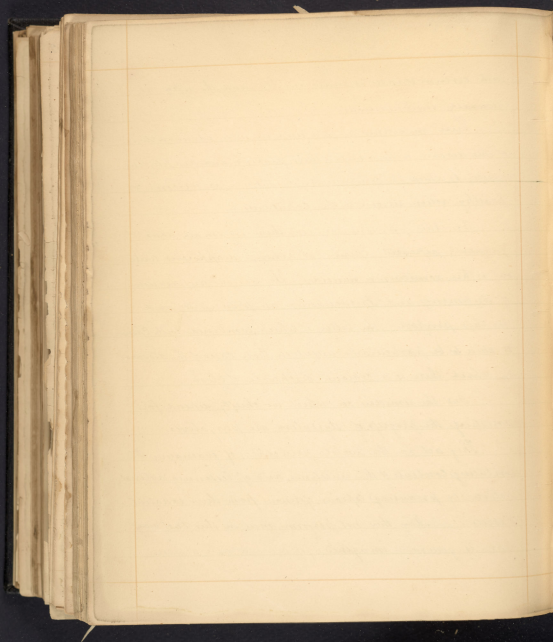
such circumstances is indispensable and the relief is generally instantaneous.

These medicines are also used in more advanced stages of this disease, with a view to their relaxing and diaphoretic effects, by which the constriction of the surface is overcome & healthy action restored to the capillaries.

For this purpose we give them in small doses frequently repeated, thereby obtaining diaphoresis without either vomiting, or nausea. The various preparations of Antimony and Ipecacuanha are principally used for this purpose, the latter of which, combined with Opium, is said to be particularly useful in those cases of the disease in which there is a copious discharge of blood.

But the remedies on which we chiefly depend for arresting the progress of dysentery are purgatives.

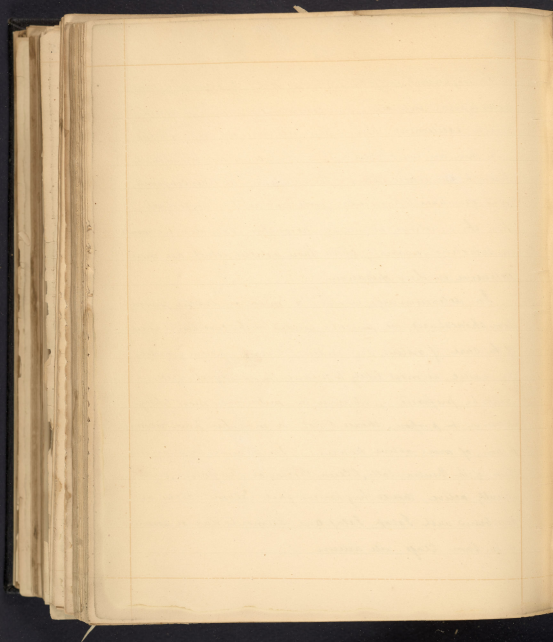
They act on the twofold principle, of evacuating the irritating contents of the intestines, and of lessening arterial action, by producing copious effusions from their exhalant vessels. May they not perform more in this last way than is generally imagined, for being directly applied,



to the inflamed surface, may they not act both as general and topical depuratives, and consequently more effectually lessen excrement, than when acting in one capacity only.

As there are two classes of these medicines, one of which acts through the whole extent of the intestines, the other confined, in its operation to particular parts, and as it is important that the intestines should be thoroughly evacuated, we should in selecting invariably choose those articles, which are more extensive in their operation.

In determining whether a mild or drastic purgative should be used, we must be guided by the circumstances of the case, if violent, demanding a very efficient practice, the drastic, as most likely to produce the speediest effects should be preferred, if otherwise the mild will most likely answer the purpose, should it not we may then have recourse to one, of more active powers. For general we shall find some of the Neutral salts, Oleum Ricini, or Magnesium, especially active, should they however fail Calomel alone or combined with Jalap, Jalap and Cremor tartar or some of the same Class will answer.

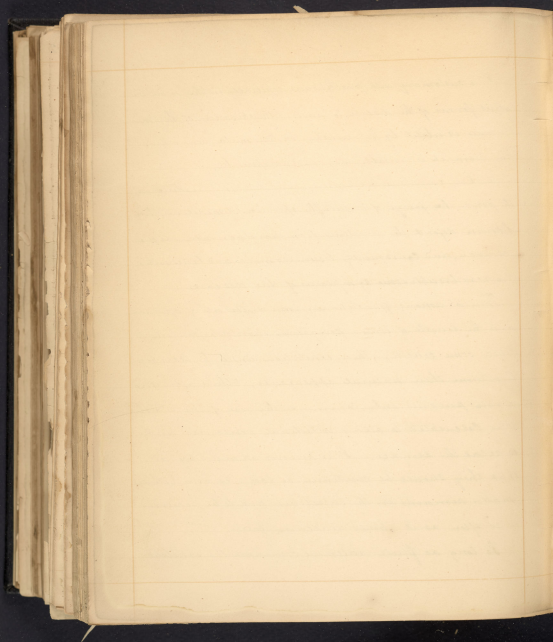


It is customary with practitioners especially in the more violent forms of the disease to hasten the operation of the medicines exhibited by the mouth, by Emetics, and when the Stomach is irritable they are indispensable.

The Ely and mucilaginous are preferred, as in addition to the power they possess of hastening the operation of medicines, they likewise defend the intestines from any acrimonious discharges, and consequently lessen tormina and tenesmus, two very troublesome symptoms of this disease.

There is among practitioners some difference of opinion as to the length of time purgatives should be continued while some continue their exhibition, until the feces begin to assume their natural appearance; Others after moderate purging only, commence the use of those articles calculated to allay intestinal irritation and to relax the surface. It is however admitted by all that they should be continued as long as any vitious matter remains in the intestines and to be renewed to so often as it should reaccumulate.

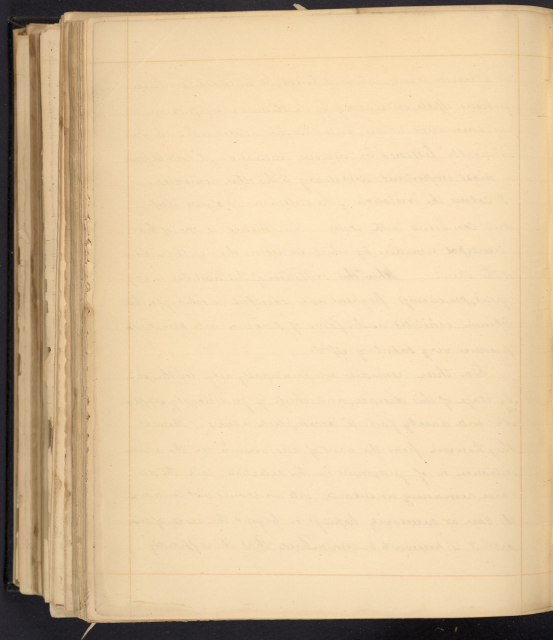
So long as febrile action continues the exhibition



of Opium would without doubt be attended with injurious effects, increasing by its stimulating property the inflammatory action, but after that action has been considerably lessened by previous evacuations, it will be found a most important auxiliary to the other remedies.

It calms the irritation of the intestines, procures sleep, and combined with some of the emetics is one of the principal remedies by which we restore the healthy action of the skin. When the irritation of the intestines is very great, producing frequent and painful discharges, the Opium exhibited in the form of enemata will sometimes produce very salutary effects.

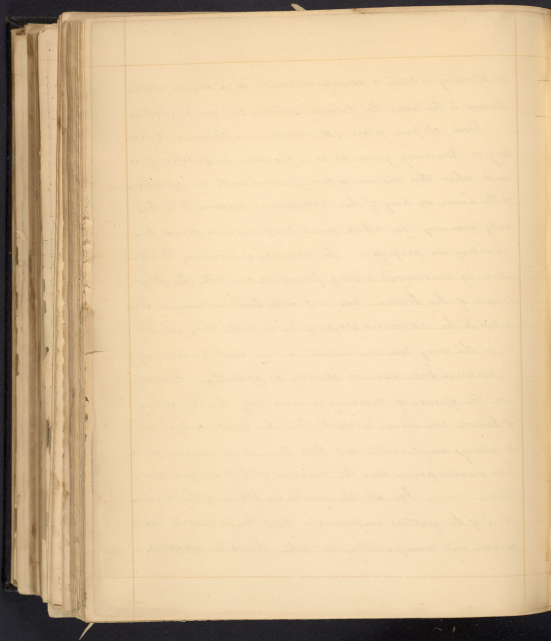
On these remedies we principally rely in the early stage of this disease, and which if judiciously employed will rarely fail to accomplish a cure. Should they however from the want of perseverance in the administration or of judgment in the selection, fail, the disease remaining unobeyed, still we should not consider the case as necessarily hopeless or beyond the reach of our art: it is however to be remembered, that the difficulty



of effecting a cure, is always increased in a degree, proportioned to the time the disease has been suffered to continue.

One of our principal remedies in Chronic Dysentery is Mercury given so as to produce its specific effect and when this disease is complicated with an affection of the Liver or any of the abdominal viscera it is then only remedy on which much confidence is placed, for arresting its progress. The practice of treating this disease by Mercury, is a very favourite one with the physicians of the Indies, nor is it with them as with us restricted to the advanced stages of the disease, they exhibit it in the very commencement and in such quantities as to produce salivation as speedily as possible. To account for the efficacy of Mercury in arresting the Dysentery of India, we must recollect that the hepatic system is always implicated, and that there is no remedy which has greater power over the diseases of that system than this.

In all the advanced stages of this disease it is of the greatest importance that the patient be kept warm and comfortably his clothes should be adapted to



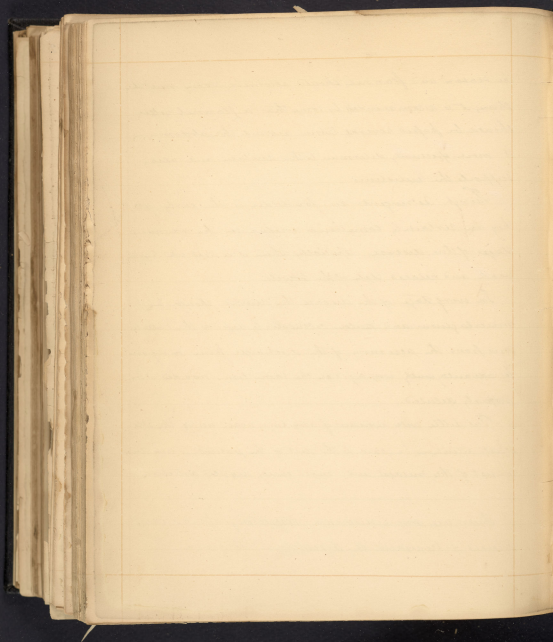
the season and flannel should always be worn next the skin; it is recommended by some that a flannel roller should be passed several times around the abdomen, it more effectually determines to the surface and also supports the intestines.

Though Astringents are forbidden in the early, yet they are certainly sometimes useful in the advanced stages of this disease, especially when it is kept up by a weak and relaxed state of the bowels.

In every stage of the disease the diet should be mucilaginous and mild, calculated to defend the intestines from the acrimony of the discharge. Wine may also be advantageously employed at the same time provided it be properly diluted.

But little will remedy of any kind avail unless the strictest attention be paid to the diet of the patient, which should consist of the mildest and most easily digested articles.

These are my sentiments respecting the nature, causes & treatment of dysentery. They are the



result of impressions made on my mind by perusing
the writings of those authors, who have treated this subject
& to whom I have had access. I am fully aware of
the imperfect manner in which these sentiments are
delivered and how much the subject suffers in conse-
-quence of not having a more able advocate. I am hur-
-ried hence with the thought that it will not be subjected
to the eyes of criticisms, but of those who, I am confi-
-dent, will be willing to make every reasonable allow-
-ance

